

Be Still, and Know that I Am God

“Be still, and know that I am God.
I am exalted among the nations,
I am exalted in the earth!”

Psalm 46:10

The struggle to believe that God lives in this world becomes increasingly arduous, and our lack of devotion and the unsteady commitment is probably not without cause. The sheer pace of our lives is sufficient to justify their shallowness. Also, if we add to the confusion and sense of detachment, the tension that has become normal, we can explain our duplicity, our waywardness, and our emptiness. There is so much going on, why shouldn't everything compete? And if God be God, then let God compete, too.

Of course, God IS competing, if we would just open our eyes. But by the time we stop to look, we're on our way to another meeting, another diversion. T.S. Eliot used an interesting phrase when he said, 'We are distracted from distraction by distraction.' To sophisticate that understanding, let me suggest that we are children of an age that has an interesting understanding of relativity. We go to a movie and pay, not just to see, but also to experience an earthquake, and then we move on from the earthquake to a climax. Now how are we to discover God in a world that starts with an earthquake and looks for something more climactic?

And if you add to that the swirling sense of rip tide about all values, or the things we thought valuable, the erosion of psyche and spirit, the rampant injustice and oppression, and the seeming impotence of people like you and me in the face of it all, it is not so strange.

And to this mood, the scripture adds a very interesting idea. We find it in the Psalms. It is the same Psalm that suggests that in the midst of all that is wrong, there is a river that flows to gladden the City of God. But the phrase that follows is critical – “Be still and know that I am God.” *Be still and know that I am God.* Find some center of focus in the midst of all the motion and know that God is not confused about God's being. The great “I AM” is not threatened by the events, and if

we would center down, we would discover that indeed God is still God. Be still and not wonder, but KNOW.

And immediately, my mind goes to an experience that Elijah had which was, in many ways, in a mood similar to ours. He had to deal with the absence of the Presence of God. This is the scene where there is to be a test between God and Baal on Mount Carmel. That test took place and people were crying for Baal. The scripture says Baal never answered. And Elijah cried out and said to them, "Holler louder! Either he is musing, or he has gone aside, or he is on a journey, or perhaps he is asleep and must be awakened." Now Elijah then gets his turn, and he calls on God, and this passage says that when God showed up, he showed up in fire and he consumed the burnt offering, he consumed the wood and the stones of the altar, licked up the water that was in the trenches, and consumed even the dust. And they knew God had been there!

Then Elijah had all the prophets of Baal killed because he was victorious. And Jezebel, the ruler's wife and a priestess in the Baal tradition, sent word that she was getting ready to kill Elijah for his unmerciful acts against the priests and prophets of Baal. Elijah moved away to the wilderness to protect himself. He took a nap and woke up hungry and a little food was provided, not much. And some miracles took place. But the thing that is amazing is that for forty days, on the strength of that little supper, he wandered on toward Mount Horab from Mount Sinai. And there he entered a cave to protect himself from the troops he thought had been sent for him. Listen.

"And behold, the Lord passed by, and a great and strong wind rent the mountains, and broke in pieces the rocks before the Lord, but the Lord was not in the wind; and after the wind an earthquake, but the Lord was not in the earthquake; and after the earthquake a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire; and after the fire a still small voice. And when Elijah heard it, he wrapped his face in his mantle and went out and stood at the entrance of the cave. And behold, there came a voice to him, and said, 'What are you doing here, Elijah?' Elijah said, 'I have been very jealous for the Lord, the God of hosts; for the people of Israel have forsaken thy covenant, thrown

down thy altars, and slain thy prophets with the sword; and I, even I only, am left; and they seek my life, to take it away.' And the Lord said to him, 'Go, return on your way to the wilderness of Damascus; and when you arrive, you shall appoint a king over Syria, and you shall anoint a king over Israel; and you shall anoint a prophet in your place.' And then the Lord said, 'Yet I will leave seven thousand in Israel, all the knees that have not bowed to Baal, and every mouth that has not kissed him.'

Now, God had moved in the experience of Mount Carmel forty some odd days before, but everything that had happened between had been enough, it seems, to confuse the mind of Elijah. There is evidence that he was forlorn and despairing when he went to the mountain. It was not a triumphant march. As a matter of fact, he prayed that he might die, and he expressed his fear of Jezebel's promise being fulfilled.

It is an interesting insight here. Elijah's understanding of God was totally different from the nature deities that were rampant in Baalism. Had God been totally revealed in nature, and understood as an expression or an extension of nature, he would have been likened to and reflective of the gods of Baal. And so, Elijah's encounter with God underscored the fact that this was something qualitatively, totally different – too great to be contained in nature; too great to be contained in the wind and the earthquake and the fire. Only the gentle stillness could express His vastness.

And it says that in the quietness, the stillness was so full of majesty that Elijah covered his face with his mantle. The stillness revealed a Presence that no cataclysmic event had disclosed – a Presence more searing and more arresting than even the Presence that had destroyed the altars – more arresting than demonstrated power. And Elijah discovered something that the Psalmist talks about – 'Be still and know that I am God.' Know that God is, in fact, the silence that broods over, around and under the chaos. It is the silence that is not consumed in the chaos – the arena of life wherein the chaos exists. And we experience God at once dramatically ultimate, intensely intimate.

Be still. In times like these God speaks the personal language of quietness to our waiting spirit. And one knows that God has not absented himself. Spirit speaks to spirit. Elijah heard a voice, and in the midst of such Presence, he did what we probably would have done – he began to pity himself, to whimper and cry. But he also patted himself on the back: “I am the only one who is left, Lord, and they are after me. I have been faithful when no other people around have been, and the reason I am up here is that they are after me because I have been so good.” Now you see, you get the root of what we do with stillness. Here is an attempt to reduce the stillness to something petty. “Let me just be up here with you in retreat and let me die.” To the ending glory of the spirit comes the insight that this intimate moment of ultimacy was not to be tucked away as something insipidly personal and private and removed from the world, because, in this instance, God demanded something. Elijah says the stillness, the silence, was demanding. It was defining. It says, in the silence he hears that God had a plan. Elijah says, “Let me just stay here,” and God said, “No, go return, I have a plan for you.” God, in the stillness, has things on His mind. God is about to do something, and so the quality of silence has been changed. The stillness was informed – full of meaning and would not allow the self-pity to take over. In the middle of silence, the silence corrected the false understanding of reality. Elijah said, ‘Lord, I am the only one here. Nobody else survived.’ If that were true, God would not be God. The arrogance of people who retreat to their silence and say, ‘Lord, you know I am the only one. They are beating on me, and I am trying to do good, but it looks like I am the only one around.’ The Lord said, “No, no, Elijah. I have seven thousand more whose mouths have not kissed and whose knees have not bowed to Baal. You are not by yourself. You may not be able to find them right away, but they are around. So get yourself together and be still, and know ME!”

It happens, you know, if you take the religious life seriously. There comes a time when you wonder. You say, ‘I am weary Lord, tired, and it looks like I am the only one around, you know.’ But calm down and know Me. Even though the chaos seems to be threatening everything, and the sense of brokenness is incredible – swirling torrents seem to be ruling the day – you listen to silence as it broods over the noise.

God says: "I am God," even when it appears that everybody has forgotten. The mystery of earth and death and love and hate and commitment remains. God is present. And it seems to me that our problem then is to search through the debris of the moment to try to discover the Presence of God and, in discovering it, listen to it. To discern God in the midst of the turmoil – the holy dimension of it calls for a more profound humanity than we presently know. It calls for a level of awareness and sensitivity that we have forgotten. But in this kind of world, it becomes important somewhere, sometime, to sit and wait and listen. And know that such stillness is not uninformed by Life and Life's urgency and Life's design. It does not usher forth in a piety that knows no commitment to the world, but ushers forth in a new consciousness of a God that plans and wills to work in the world that He has created.

Be still and know that I am God. It will not be easy for us, for the times are fearsome. Indeed the very demand of staying alive, abreast of things, is such that it seems strange to be talking about being still. And if we attempt to listen and lose some ground, these are the kind of times when it will be very easy to desert the voice. Memories, nostalgia, hopes, fears, all of this will tempt the weary spirit. But I say to you – Wait – and if in the break-up and the drama of the moment, God is not there, Wait, for God may appear with a message and a plan in the quietness that surrounds the noise of the hour.

Be still, therefore, and know that I am God. Be still and know that if I be God, I am still in control. Be still and know, therefore, that your quick righteousness may indeed be too selfish. Be still and know that I am alive – not just in you. And if you are faithful, thousands more are around to join you. Life is literally full of my Presence. Be still and know that your strength lies in this quietness and confidence.